

Hamartiology: A Brief Essay on the Doctrine of Sin

(With Greek and Hebrew Terms and Transliterations)

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1. Introduction

Hamartiology—the doctrine of sin—stands at the center of Christian theology because it explains both the human condition and the necessity of redemption. Every major doctrine intersects with it: anthropology, soteriology, Christology, and eschatology. Without a clear understanding of sin, the biblical narrative loses coherence, the cross loses meaning, and the Christian life loses direction. This essay surveys the biblical vocabulary of sin, the nature and effects of sin, the universality of human fallenness, and the theological implications that follow.

1.1 Definition of Hamartiology

Hamartiology is the branch of Christian theology that studies the origin, nature, extent, and consequences of sin. The term derives from the Greek word *ἁμαρτία* (*hamartia*), meaning “sin,” combined with *-λογία* (*-logia*), meaning “study” or “doctrine.” In systematic theology, hamartiology examines both **inherited sin** and **personal sin**, the moral and relational effects of sin on humanity, and the biblical framework for understanding human fallenness. As Millard Erickson notes, hamartiology is concerned with “the reality, universality, and seriousness of sin as presented in Scripture,”¹ making it foundational for understanding salvation, grace, and the work of Christ.

2. Biblical Vocabulary of Sin

2.1 *ἁμαρτία* (*hamartia*) — Missing the Mark

The most common New Testament term for sin is *ἁμαρτία* (*hamartia*), meaning “to miss the mark.” The imagery is not of failing human potential but of failing to meet the standard of God’s holy character. Sin is therefore not merely moral imperfection; it is a failure to conform to the divine will.

2.2 *παράπτωμα* (*paraptōma*) — Trespass

The term *παράπτωμα* (*paraptōma*) means “false step” or “trespass.” It emphasizes deviation—stepping off the right path. Sin is not only falling short but also wandering into territory where humans do not belong.

2.3 *ἀνομία* (*anomia*) — Lawlessness

The word **ἀνομία (anomia)** highlights rebellion. It describes sin as a posture of resistance toward God’s authority. First John 3:4 states the matter plainly: “Sin is lawlessness.” The issue is not ignorance but defiance.

2.4 Hebrew Terms for Sin

The Old Testament vocabulary adds depth and nuance:

- **חַטָּא (hattā’āh)** — “sin,” missing the mark
- **יָצָו (‘āvon)** — “iniquity,” moral distortion or twistedness
- **פְּשָׁע (peša’)** — “rebellion,” covenant breach

The Hebrew terms for sin each carry a distinct theological emphasis.

- **חַטָּא (hattā’āh)** describes failure or missing the mark, often in a moral or covenantal sense. In the LXX, it is most frequently translated with **ἁμαρτία (hamartia)**, **the same Greek term that becomes the dominant New Testament word for sin.**
- **יָצָו (‘āvon)**, meaning “iniquity” or “moral crookedness,” is commonly rendered by **ἀνομία (anomia)** in the LXX, emphasizing lawlessness and moral disorder.
- **פְּשָׁע (peša’)**, **which denotes open rebellion or covenant violation, is often translated with παράπτωμα (paraptōma)** or sometimes **ἀσέβεια (asebeia)** meaning ungodliness, highlighting the relational breach and defiant posture inherent in the term. These translation choices show that the LXX translators understood sin not merely as error but as a complex reality involving failure, distortion, and rebellion—categories that carry directly into New Testament theology.

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Together, these terms portray sin as **failure, corruption, and revolt.**

3. The Nature of Sin

3.1 Sin as a Power

Paul often describes sin as a dominating force—something that “reigns” (Romans 6:12) and enslaves. In this sense, **ἁμαρτία (hamartia)** is not merely an act but a tyrant. Humans are not neutral agents who occasionally do wrong; they are subjects under a hostile power apart from grace.

3.2 Sin as Corruption

Sin distorts the **תְּצַלֵּם אֱלֹהִים (tselem Elohim)**, the image of God in humanity. The mind becomes darkened, desires become disordered, and relationships become fractured. This corruption is pervasive, touching every aspect of human life, though it does not erase human dignity.

3.3 Sin as Alienation

Sin produces alienation from God, from others, and even from oneself. In Genesis 3, the first instinct after sin is hiding—an instinctive withdrawal from God’s presence. Alienation is not merely emotional; it is relational and spiritual.

4. The Universality of Sin

4.1 Scriptural Testimony

Romans 3:23 summarizes the biblical witness: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The universality of **ἁμαρτία (hamartia)** is not a statistical observation but a theological truth rooted in the solidarity of the human race.

4.2 Original Sin

Christian tradition uses the term “original sin” to describe the inherited condition of fallenness. Humans do not bear guilt for Adam’s specific act, but they inherit a corrupted nature and a world already bent away from God.

4.3 Personal Sin

While humans inherit a sinful condition, they also commit actual sins—acts of disobedience, neglect, and rebellion. Personal sin flows naturally from the fallen nature but remains fully accountable.

5. The Consequences of Sin

5.1 Spiritual Death

Sin results in separation from God, the source of life. This spiritual death precedes physical death and makes redemption necessary.

5.2 Moral Disorder

Sin disorders human desires. Augustine described this as **ordo amoris**—the disordered love that lies at the heart of sin. What should be loved is neglected; what should be avoided is pursued.

5.3 Social Breakdown

Sin fractures human relationships. Violence, injustice, exploitation, and oppression are not merely social problems but theological ones.

5.4 Cosmic Impact

Romans 8 portrays creation itself as groaning under the weight of human sin. The fall affects not only individuals but the entire created order.

6. The Remedy for Sin

6.1 Divine Initiative

Scripture consistently portrays God as the initiator of redemption. Humanity does not climb out of **ἁμαρτία (hamartia)**; God descends to rescue.

6.2 The Cross

The cross is the decisive answer to sin. Christ bears **ἁμαρτία (hamartia)**, breaks its power, and opens the way to reconciliation. The New Testament uses multiple metaphors—sacrifice, ransom, victory—to describe this work.

6.3 Regeneration and Sanctification

Salvation is not merely forgiveness but transformation. The Spirit renews the heart, reorders desires, and empowers obedience. Sanctification is the ongoing restoration of the **צלם אלהים** (tselem Elohim), the image of God in the believer.

7 Accountability

Although humanity inherits a fallen nature from Adam, Scripture does not teach that individuals are condemned **merely** because of Adam's sin. The inherited condition of fallenness inevitably produces conscious, deliberate acts or omissions—our own **ἁμαρτία (hamartia)** and **παράπτωμα (paraptōma)**—and it is these personal sins that bring moral accountability before God. Until a person reaches a point of genuine awareness of right and wrong, Scripture indicates that God does not hold them accountable for sins committed in ignorance. Moses teaches that “the person who does anything with a high hand... shall bear his guilt,” but the one who sins unintentionally is treated differently (Numbers 15:27–30). Paul likewise affirms that “sin is not counted where there is no law” (Romans 5:13), indicating that moral accountability presupposes moral awareness. Thus, while the sinful nature is inherited, **condemnation is tied to personal, conscious transgression**, not to Adam's guilt alone. Then there is James 4:17 that points directly to awareness before accountability. This verse is one of the clearest biblical statements that **moral accountability requires moral awareness**.

7.1 Conclusion

Hamartiology is not an abstract doctrine but a lens through which the entire Christian story becomes intelligible. It explains the human condition, reveals the depth of divine grace, and clarifies the purpose of the Christian life. To understand sin is to understand why redemption is necessary, why the cross is central, and why the Christian hope is ultimately a hope for restoration. In the end, hamartiology is not a doctrine of despair but a doorway to the good news that God has acted decisively to heal what sin has broken.

Recommended Reading

Layman Level (Accessible Introductions)

- **The Pursuit of Holiness** — Jerry Bridges A clear, practical introduction to the nature of sin and the believer's call to holiness. Bridges explains sin's subtlety and the need for disciplined obedience.
- **The Screwtape Letters** — C. S. Lewis A creative exploration of temptation and spiritual warfare. While not a systematic treatment of sin, it vividly illustrates how sin operates in daily life.
- **Knowing God** — J. I. Packer Contains several chapters that explain God's holiness, human sinfulness, and the need for atonement in a way accessible to general readers.
- **The Holiness of God** — R. C. Sproul A compelling introduction to God's holiness and why sin is so serious. Sproul's treatment of Isaiah 6 is especially helpful.
- **Mere Christianity** — C. S. Lewis Offers a clear explanation of the moral law, human fallenness, and the logic of Christian redemption.

Scholar Level (Academic and Technical Works)

- **The Nature of Sin** — G. C. Berkouwer A rigorous theological study of sin's essence, effects, and relationship to human freedom and responsibility.
- **Hamartiology in the New Testament** — Colin Gunton (various essays) Explores sin as relational rupture and examines key Greek terms such as ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*), ἀνομία (*anomia*), and παράπτωμα (*paraptōma*).
- **The Doctrine of Sin** — I. Howard Marshall (in *New Bible Dictionary* and other works) A concise but scholarly overview of biblical terminology and theological development.
- **Paul and the Power of Sin** — James D. G. Dunn A detailed study of Paul's understanding of sin as a dominating power rather than merely individual acts.
- **Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)** — Gerhard Kittel, ed. Essential for in-depth study of Greek terms such as ἁμαρτία, ἀνομία, ἀσέβεια (*asebeia*), and παράπτωμα. Provides historical, linguistic, and theological analysis.
- **Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT)** — Harris, Archer, Waltke Authoritative entries on Hebrew terms such as חַטָּא (*ḥaṭṭā 'āh*), יָצַח (*'āvon*), and עֲשָׂה (*peša'*), including LXX equivalents.
- **Sin: A History** — Gary A. Anderson A scholarly but readable exploration of how Jewish and Christian traditions have understood sin, especially the metaphors of debt and burden.